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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to examine how a college supervisor can reduce stress in the post-conference analysis of a lesson taught by an intern, and to determine the merits of both informal and formal post-conferencing. Informal post-conferencing was introduced to create a more relaxed, comfortable, and less rigid environment to alleviate intern anxiety, fear, and nervousness and to create a more humanistic, casual, natural, unconstrained milieu. In keeping with the humanistic philosophy, the college supervisor is exhorted to perform the role of coach rather than judge. The main element in informal post-conferencing that distinguished it from formal conferencing was the elimination of the supervisor's formal written report. Because some interns preferred a more structured approach, an opportunity to choose between formal and informal conferences was offered. Based on the perceptions and opinions of 45 interns and 2 college supervisors, it was concluded that informal post-conferences promoted more relaxed and formative coaching sessions; produced a more comfortable, congenial, and trusting environment; and, provided a greater degree of interaction, self-analysis, and reflection. Experienced college supervisors felt more effective in the humanistic approach. (LL)

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Abstract

A study during the Spring 1992 was conducted to determine perceptions and opinions on the merits of both informal and formal post-conferencing in the practicum of the teacher education program. Informal post-conferencing was introduced as an experiment designed to increase intern comfort level during college supervisor visitations.

Most interns indicated that informal post-conferencing produced a comfortable, relaxed, congenial and trusting environment. The dynamics of the informal approach indicate a greater degree of interaction, self-analysis and reflection. The option to choose was significant because some preferred a more structured approach while all felt more empowered by this opportunity. The college supervisors felt more effective as humanistic supervisors. Hence, informal post-conferencing expands the scope for experienced college supervisors. It was also concluded that the choice between formal or informal was important because of the implications for cultural differences and reflective thinking.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS...

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PERCEPTIONS OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL POST-CONFERENCES IN SUPERVISING INTERNS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

How can a college supervisor reduce the stress of an intern in the post-conference analysis of a lesson? The formal reporting procedure to document the supervision cycle used by the Internship Program of the College of Education, University of Saskatchewan may impede the goals of the humanistic approach of supervision. Hence, the choice of an informal post-conference approach appeared to be a logical topic for research.

Based on the perceptions of forty-five interns and two college supervisors, it was concluded that informal post-conferences promoted more relaxed and formative coaching sessions for many interns.

The post-conference phase of the developmental supervision cycle is theoretically designed to assist interns to improve their teaching performance. The post-conference allows interns to self-analyze and interpret objective written feedback that has been targeted for classroom observation during the pre-conference stage of the supervision cycle.

The philosophy of humanism is considered to be a key element of supervision in the internship program. In keeping with this philosophy the college supervisor is exhorted to perform the role of helper, facilitator and learner rather than teller and expert.

THE FORMAL POST-CONFERENCE

The pre-conference component of the supervision cycle involves a review of the intern's lesson plan and the selection of professional teaching targets for the observational data collection during the teaching of an intern's lesson. The specific

focus for the post-conference deliberations is the data collected during observation of the lesson while general aspects of the lesson are open for discussion at the intern's request. These common practices remain the same for both the formal and informal post-conference. The emphasis in both processes is primarily formative with the intern being given the opportunity to analyze and interpret data to assist the intern to reflect upon teaching performance and professional growth.

The major distinction between the formal and informal post-conference process is that in the former the college supervisor writes a formative report. This report clearly indicates teaching strengths and identifies teaching targets that require improvement and development. The report is signed by all three members of the triad -- intern, teacher, and college supervisor. One copy is given to the intern, one copy remains in the possession of the college supervisor, and a third copy is delivered to the Center for School-Based Programs. The report serves as written documentation which allows the college to have a reference on every intern's development in the field.

Although there are certainly administrative merits for this written report, and its purpose is self-improvement, many interns perceive the report to be an evaluation that may threaten their internship. Therefore, interns frequently are nervous, lack self-confidence, and are fearful of college supervision visitations.

THE INFORMAL POST-CONFERENCE

In an attempt to move beyond rigid procedures that tend to impede the humanistic approach a research project was developed with a post-conference process that was entitled "informal". The purpose of experimenting with an informal process of post-conferencing was the concern to create a more relaxed, comfortable and less rigid post-conference environment to alleviate intern anxiety, fear and nervousness. Guidelines for informal post-conferencing were designed to

create a more casual, natural, unconstrained milieu.

The main element in informal post-conferencing that distinguished it from formal conferencing was the elimination of the college supervisor's formal written report. In place of the college supervisor's written report, all three members of the triad were expected to keep their own notes of the post-conference proceedings. This was intended to place more responsibility on the intern to feel free to discuss, interpret data, listen, self-analyze, and reflect on his/her own teaching performance. The emphasis or image of the college supervisor's role was to be one of a "coach" rather than the "judge". The college supervisor maintained careful notes of the post-conference reflections and always reviewed with the intern the reflections on teaching strengths displayed and targets needing improvement upon conclusion of the post-conference.

RESEARCH EXPERIMENT I

The first experiment with informal post-conferencing began in the spring term of 1991 with a group of twenty-seven interns placed in Saskatoon schools.

During this extended practicum term almost all post-conference proceedings were conducted informally. Interns were informed at the first visitation that if difficulties developed during the practicum the college supervisor would be required to document the problems in a formal report. This occurred in three cases. Of these cases, two interns were withdrawn from the internship program.

Initial observations and reflections on informal post-conferencing were positive. The informal process appeared to promote a more open, trusting and relaxed atmosphere for both the intern and college supervisor. Post-conference reflections seemed to be more flexible, less rigid in structure, more comfortable, and tended to last longer than formal conferences. Many interns appeared to be less anxious and nervous. It was assumed this occurred because interns were less fearful

that their performance was being evaluated by the college supervisor and would be reported formally to the office of the Center for School-Based Programs.

However, it was also noted that some interns would have preferred more structure and would have been receptive to a written report by the college supervisor. It was also observed that not all interns took responsibility for taking their own notes or for self-reflecting during informal post-conference proceedings.

RESEARCH EXPERIMENT II

As a result of the initial experimental observations, a second experiment was begun in the fall term of 1991 with thirty-two interns placed in Saskatoon schools. Research Experiment I findings indicated that if given the choice, interns might choose either formal or informal post-conferencing. Therefore, interns in this Research Experiment II were offered the choice between formal or informal post-conferencing at the time of every college supervisory visitation. However, interns experiencing problems upon the first visitation were not given the option of post-conferencing informally and their difficulties were formally documented from the very beginning of internship.

At the end of the 1991 fall term the findings regarding choice showed that eighteen of the thirty-two interns chose informal conferencing all of the time, five interns chose formal conferencing all of the time, while six chose to experience both processes. Three interns were not given the choice between formal or informal conferencing because of initial teaching problems. These results indicated that informal post-conferencing was the most popular choice.

RESEARCH EXPERIMENT III

Experiment III began in the spring term of 1992. Because of the popularity of informal conferencing the research sample was expanded to include two research

groups. One group consisted of nineteen interns in rural Saskatchewan while a second group consisted of twenty-six interns located in the Prince Albert region. These interns were offered the choice of informal or formal post-conferencing during each college supervisor's visitation. All interns were interviewed at the close of the term to ascertain why they had chosen one process of conferencing as opposed to the other. Eight of the forty-five interns were not given the choice due to policy requirements.

The Informal Choice

After the researchers explained the formal and informal post-conference, interns were invited to choose. Twenty-one of the thirty-nine interns chose the informal post-conference approach every visitation.

Among the concerns of interns prior to and early in the internship is the role of the college supervisor. Some were anxious "... to get the visitation over with". The very fact that the college supervisor invited them to choose the format of the post-conference often was a relief for the intern. The formal post-conference with a report in triplicate often appeared more intimidating. Such structured procedures and the long drive to the school implied that evaluation rather than support was foremost on the agenda of the College of Education.

The role of the college supervisor, as perceived by the Center for School Based Programs, was that of a facilitator supportive of the co-operating teacher and intern. The college supervisor's role was defined more as a coach than as an official evaluator for the university. Most respondents concluded that a formal post-conference report implied evaluation rather than a formative stage in the continuous growth of teaching skills.

"I felt more at ease discussing lessons informally..." was a typical response that suggested this method reduced pressure and promoted a more relaxed

environment for the triad. Everyone was more secure with the knowledge that the analysis and discussion remained with the three participants. The intern could summarize the positive and corrective feedback as deemed necessary. There were fewer lingering questions such as : how will the college copy be used? What bearing will the content have on the final evaluation? Hence , anxiety about a potential hidden agenda was avoided.

The informal post-conference appeared to enhance opportunities to train "the reflective practitioner". Most interns felt they had a greater opportunity to become involved in the analysis of the data. By making their own summary they felt that they had a part in their professional growth and more responsibility for their own development. As one observed, "... a formal written report wouldn't really allow me to evaluate my own teaching because the college supervisor would be doing the evaluating".

Participants in the semester-end interviews expressed an appreciation of the flexibility that characterized the informal process. "I felt that I didn't have to fit in" was a typical comment. They believed that there was more open-ended discussion and interaction among the triad. Interns were more comfortable in raising questions which enabled them to analyze their techniques and skills at a higher level. One concluded, "... we could discuss more openly and in a more relaxed manner".

A positive relationship among members of the triad is regarded as a significant contributor to the success of internship. The inservices, especially the first, are designed to promote an "intern-co-operative teacher" working relationship. Many interns believed that the informal format enhanced the building of an "intern-college supervisor" relationship. Because the interns perceived themselves as "more equal" , it was easier to trust the college supervisor. One intern noted that "...I felt informal conferencing helped establish a more personal and comfortable relationship with the college supervisor." This trust was

further advanced when the intern was placed in charge of her/his own note-taking to summarize the proceedings.

In conclusion, many viewed the formal report as serving the needs of the bureaucracy rather than the aspirations and concerns of the intern. Several felt that the time used to write a formal report was much better utilized by discussing the lesson in greater depth and addressing the intern's concerns.

The Formal Choice

Nine interns preferred the formal post-conference. "I think I'll stick to the regular formal post-conference," was a common response. A deciding factor in this decision appeared to be the fear of experimenting in their internship and risking a departure from established procedures. Many who were very confident had no qualms about reports by a college supervisor. Some felt that "it is preferable to know that the University knows what is happening with my internship." Moreover, some thought that a formal report, "...could prevent disagreements if they occurred at different stages of the evaluation." They preferred to have a formal report that expressed the common opinion of each member of the triad as a documented protection in case of disagreements. "I want something concrete that I can refer to...", was expressed by a few who saw this as a better guideline for improving their teaching. Several regarded the formal report to be useful for the mid-term and final evaluations. Two interns simply judged that their chances of success would be greater in an established format.

Combination of Choices

Seven interns chose both informal and formal post-conferencing. Five of the seven interns chose informal post conferencing first and then later in the internship shifted to formal conferencing. This group believed informal conferencing at the

beginning of the internship created a less fearful environment and established a positive comfort level.

One respondent felt the relationship of the triad at the beginning of the internship was most important. There was a lack of trust on the part of the intern who expressed an aversion for written evaluations. This intern sensed a degree of anguish over this fear and informal conferencing relieved this concern.

There was a general feeling among this group that informal conferencing was more open, flexible and dynamic. Why, then, did this group shift later in the internship to a formal post conference? Most suggested the informal process had allowed them to develop a level of trust with the college supervisor that enabled them to believe the formal process was no longer a perceived threat. All expressed the opinion that they gradually desired a more structured process with the information being specific; and formally recorded so they would have something to refer to at a later time. One intern stated, "I benefited the most from the formal process because of the structure." Another stated, "...a written document was more useful because it was concrete." This intern had not taken notes during the informal process and wanted to use the report as a reference. This intern believed the written document gave him more security as the written report could be used as evidence if conflict should develop regarding the final evaluation. One intern responded, "the most significant element was the choice itself which I greatly appreciated."

Two interns from this group chose the formal process first and then shifted to the informal process of conferencing later in the internship. One intern viewed the written report as more valuable because it was done by someone with more experience than their cooperating teacher. Both interns expressed the desire for a specific written report that could be used as a future reference. One intern felt the college supervisor's first impression of their teaching was most important and

should be documented.

Why did these two interns shift from a formal process to an informal process? One responded, "I simply felt more comfortable and self-confident." The other intern believed that having their performance recorded was not as critical as a better understanding of their own development occurred.

COLLEGE SUPERVISOR PERSPECTIVES

The option of informal post conferencing was a welcome alternative for experienced college supervisors. The very possibility of a choice was stimulating and permitted another technique to enhance personal relationships between interns and cooperative teachers. Both researchers found the informal procedure to be more comfortable and relaxing which coincided with interns who were less threatened by the college supervisor.

A major limitation on the college supervisor's ability to build a positive, helping relationship with the intern is the lack of time. In this experiment it was possible to substitute the extra time required to write the formal report appropriately with extra time for dialogue as a triad. There was less pressure to hasten the analysis of the data and get on with the writing of the report. Hence, it was possible to provide more assistance to the intern regarding raising suitable questions for analysis. In subsequent visitations the interns moved more rapidly and more comfortably into the analysis mode, frequently displaying visible joy in discovering something new about their teaching or verifying that they were on the right path. Thus, this broader scope enhanced the "facilitator" role of the college supervisor.

A vital professional attribute is the ability to analyze one's own teaching and subsequently act upon the findings. The college supervisors in this experiment felt that the informal post conference facilitated more rapid development of reflection. The expectation that interns must make their own analysis and summary forced

interns into a more active role in the post-conference.

Another challenge for college supervisors is to establish a co-professional, collegial atmosphere. By increasing the role of the intern in post-conferences and removing the fear of a report that will go to a third party, the college supervisors felt that they were able to convey to interns a common pursuit toward the excellence of teaching.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The informal post-conference is a valid technique for the humanistic supervisor. Most of the respondents in this study believed that it reduced their concerns and anxiety regarding the college supervisor. An atmosphere of comfort, ease and collegiality as well as a trust relationship developed more readily. An additional key merit was the opportunity for the intern to choose the post-conference format. This choice promoted a feeling of empowerment and partnership in professional growth. Moreover, the responsibility of summarizing the dialogue of the triad assisted interns to take control of and assume responsibility for their internship. Their option enabled the college supervisors to broaden the scope of their supervisory techniques. College supervisors were able to utilize their time more effectively by focusing on data analysis, questioning, and coaching the intern to be self-analytical rather than writing formal reports.

Arising from the research, at least two further studies emerge. First, does the informal post conference enhance reflective thinking? In this study more time was spent on reflection during informal post-conferences compared to the formal. It appears that the writing of a journal may be more closely connected with the informal post-conference. Second, because the informal post-conference contributed to a more comfortable, relaxed process that built trust, would the informal process relieve the anxieties of interns from visible minority groups?

Formal post-conferences and the corresponding format retain a significant

place in the internship. Some very practical limitations to the useage of informal post-conferences can be identified. If the college supervisor detects that the intern-cooperative teacher relationship is weak or that the intern's performance is marginal and may necessitate a withdrawal from the internship, formal post-conferencing lends itself better to essential documentation that is available to each member of the triad. Also, interns should be given a choice since it appears that some interns prefer the more structured formal post conference.

The role of the college supervisor requires considerable experience. It is therefore recommended that college supervisors experience several practicum terms with the formal post-conference procedure before expanding to the informal. The informal approach facilitates opportunities for experienced college supervisors to provide opportunities for interns to expand their role in the supervision process.